MAGAZINE SECTION

Features

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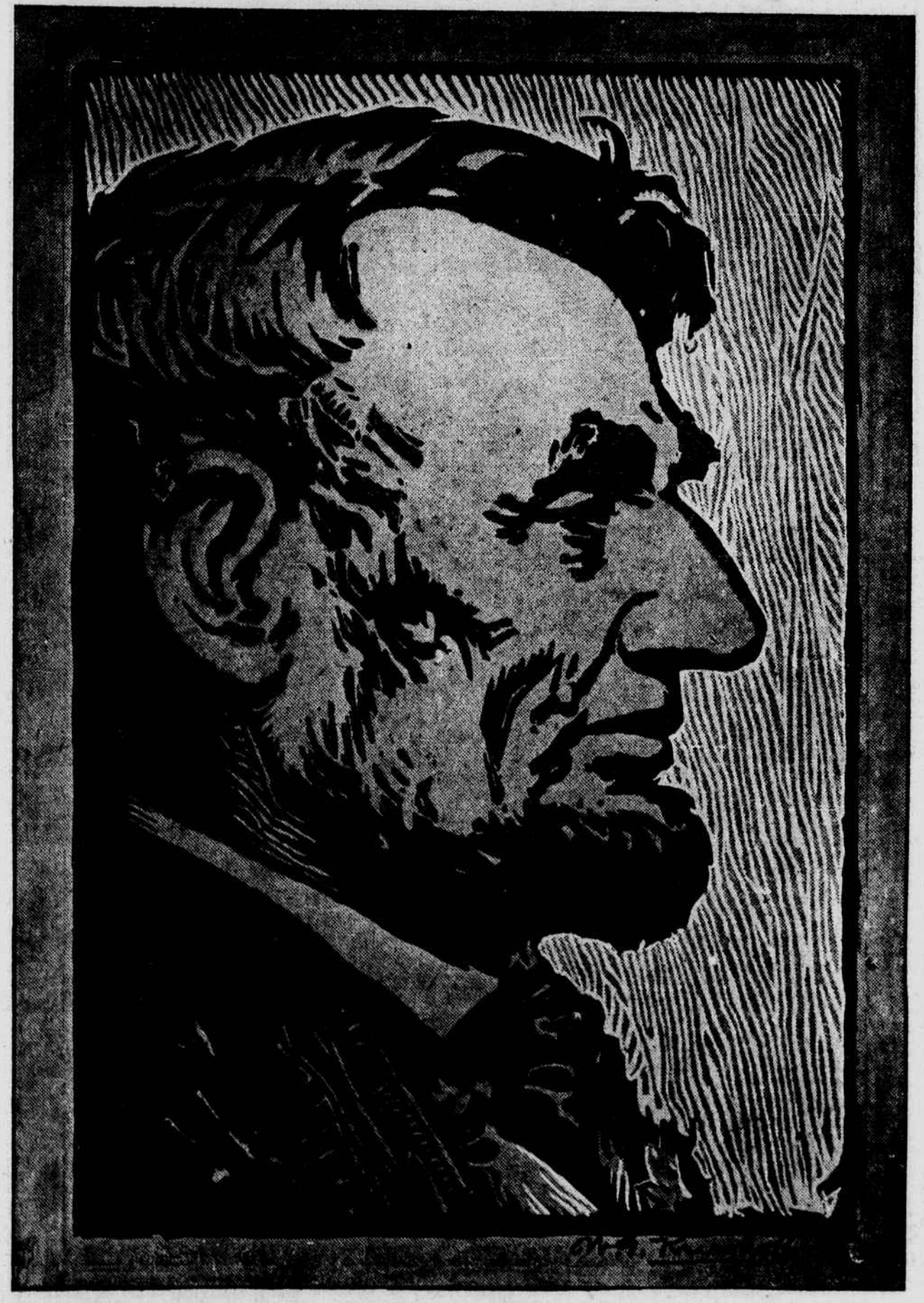
What Would Lincoln Do If He Were Alive?

History Records His Attitude on the Question of a League of Nations—It Shown Him to Have Been a Teetotaler—He Had a Short Shrift for the Bolshevik—His Letters Among the Classics—Some Interesting Sidelights on His Life.



"I HAVE not willingly planted a thorn in any man's bosom." None could say so more truthfully than Abraham Lincoln. This, together with having preserved the Union and freed the slaves, was his greatest glory. For a thousand times, when the power to strike was his and the incentive for revenge would have filled the bosoms of most other men with devouring flames of wrath, he meekly forbore, and, in lieu of chastisement, contented himself with administering good-natured, kindly advice to the offenders.

An illustration of this was his treatment of Clement L. Vallandigham, who had made a violent anti-draft speech and whose imprisonment sentence Lincoln commuted to transportation beyond the military lines. Other acts of defiance by friends of Vallandigham on the refusal of the President to make effective in his behalf the writ of habeas corpus in an area under martial law elicited only this characteristic response:

"Must I shoot the simple-minded soldier boy who deserts, while I must not touch a hair of a wily agitator who induces him to desert?"

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Lincoln had even offered to release Vallandigham, who had been nominated for Governor of Ohio, if the friends who interceded for him would sign a declaration that there was a state of rebellion and that an army and navy were constitutional means to suppress it. This they refused to do. Their contumacy and the President's generosity caused a revulsion of feeling in Ohio, and Vallandigham, who had first been regarded as a sort of martyr, was defeated at the polls by an overwhelming majority.

Prohibitionists have especial reason to celebrate Lincoln's birthday anniversary this year, wherein they have scored the double victory of liquor drought both by constitutional amendment and as a military measure. Lincoln was a teetotaler. One of the first uses he made of his ability to write as a boy was to prepare an argument for temperance. This was printed in an Indiana newspaper. To a member of Congress he said in 1854, in his forty-fifth year:

"I do not in theory, but I do in fact, belong to the temperance society, in this, to wit, that I do not drink anything, and have not done so for very many years."

To the committee appointed by the republican national convention at Chicago, May 16, 1860, to announce formally to Lincoln at his home in Springfield, Ill., his nomination for the presidency, he said:

"Gentlemen, we must pledge our mutual healths in the most healthy beverage which God has given to man. It is the only beverage I have ever used or allowed in my family, and I cannot conscientiously depart from it on the present occasion."

Appropriate likewise is the celebration of his natal anniversary at a time when the great peace conference is sitting to devise means for a league of all nations and the insuring of freedom to all mankind. Union and freedom were the guiding stars in Lincoln's life. For this reason he made the Constitution of the United States his chart and the Declaration of Independence his compass from the time he was first able to comprehend their meaning.

In a speech in 1858, when he was running for the United States Senate against Stephen A. Douglas, the democratic candidate, he said:

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"This (the Declaration of Independence) was their lofty and noble and wise understanding of the justice of the Creator to His creatures—to all His creatures, to the whole great family of man. In their enlightened belief nothing stamped with the divine image was sent into the world to be trodden on and degraded and imbruted by its fellows. They grasped not only the whole race of men then living, but they reached forward and seized upon the remotest posterity. * * * So that no man should hereafter dare to limit and circumscribe the great principles upon which the temple of liberty was built."

And again, years afterward, when Gen. Lee had been defeated at Gettysburg in July, 1863, and in November that battlefield was dedicated as a soldiers' cemetery, Lincoln said:

"Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.

"We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

"But in a large sense we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.

"It is for us, the living, rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth."

In this noble speech Lincoln was mistaken only in his belief that the world would "little note nor long remember" what he said on that occasion.

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School teachers had but little to do with Lincoln's training. All told he attended school less than a year in all his life. And yet many of his speeches are ranked as among the most treasured classics of our language, and beneath a letter of his, preserved in one of the colleges at Oxford, the authorities of that institution have appended the comment: "One of the purest specimens of pure English extant." The letter is as follows:

"Dear Madam: I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the adjutant general of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any words of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering to you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the republic they died to save. I pray that the Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.

"Yours very sincerely and respectfully, ABRAHAM LINCOLN."

And of his second inaugural address, delivered March 4, 1865, the London Spectator declared: "We cannot read it without a renewed conviction that it is the noblest political document known to history. * * * Surely none was ever written under a stronger sense of the reality of God's government. And certainly none, written in a period of passionate conflict, ever so completely excluded the partiality of victorious faction and breathed so pure a strain of mingled justice and mercy."

Here is the concluding portion of this address:

"Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that the mighty scourge of war may pass away. Yet if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's 250 years of unrequited toil shall be sunk and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn by the sword, as was said 3,000 years ago, so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.' With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right, let us strive as God gives us to see the right; let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphans, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves with all nations."

Many have asked the question how one who had received no more schooling than could be crowded into less than a year could attain to such high excellence in oratory and literature.

He needed no teacher other than the inspiring light of his own genius, which showed him how to make the most fruitful use of whatever books chance brought to his hand. His mother, Nancy Hanks, a woman of far higher intellectuality than is ordinarily found in the lowly sphere in which the Lincoln family moved, taught him to form the letters of the alphabet. Much beyond this her store of learning did not go; but it sufficed in Abraham's case to unlock to him the treasures of the Bible, Aesop's Fables, Robinson Crusoe, Pilgrim's Progress, History of the United States and Weems' Life of Washington.

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His first reading of these volumes was prompted by curiosity to know the "stories" they contained. They so impressed young Abraham's mind that he wanted to tell the whole world about the interesting things he had "discovered." He found it hard to express himself in as interesting a manner as the authors had expressed themselves to him; so he went at the books again and again, rereading them until he had well-nigh committed them to memory.

Not only that; like the ancient Greek Demosthenes, the greatest of all orators, who transcribed Thucydides' many-volumed history, Lincoln, too, transcribed a great deal of what he read. Judging from results it will not be amiss, for the benefit of ambitious youngsters of today, to outline just about how this young embryonic President proceeded in his self-imposed task of garnering the wealth of thought which he found in the books.

He would read a paragraph, then think it over, and, after having mastered the ideas contained in it, he would write down these ideas in his own words. Then he would go on to the next paragraph and repeat this operation, and so on and on, until he felt he had done enough mental harvesting for the day.

Many a word which the boy encountered in his readings was, of course, unintelligible to him. He had no unabridged dictionary in those early years of his life to aid him in getting at their meaning, their derivation or their pronunciation, and so he was left to get, from the context, such meaning of these words as "common sense" suggested. But, if the correct usage of words in the writings of his mature years is any criterion, he must have done what other great minds have done and will ever continue to do in such a contingency, namely, jotted down upon a piece of paper every word of unfamiliar import and either looked up its definition as soon as opportunity offered, or else asked somebody qualified to know to tell him its meaning. And as soon thereafter as possible he would use these words either in his conversation or writing.

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Nancy Hanks Lincoln died in 1818, when Abraham was nine years old. A year or so later his father, Thomas Lincoln, married again, this time a widow, Mrs. Sally Bush Johnston, who had been his flame before he had met Nancy Hanks. Fortunately, the stepmother proved to be kindhearted and motherly, and it was her insistence which obtained from her utterly illiterate husband permission for his young son to indulge the fondness for reading. The elder Lincoln regarded every minute spent over books a waste of time, and until his new wife's intercession he had made it almost impossible for the boy to do any reading except by stealth.

Later, when Abraham was drawing toward the close of his teens, he obtained from Maj. John T. Stuart, a lawyer, a copy of Blackstone's commentaries; and as the major's office was in New Salem and Abraham's parental log-cabin home twenty-odd miles away, he walked that distance

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